

Quintessence of Truth and Beauty in the Writings of Rabindranath

Tagore and Keats

A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract:

In literary works, truth and beauty have been expressed in a varied number of ways by authors of all genres. Rabindranath Tagore and John Keats, two prominent writers from two languages have linked beauty and truth in philosophical manners in many of their writings. Beauty and truth are not separate entities; they flow from the same spring. Tagore views beauty as linked to eternal characteristics of nature and truth is associated with it. Keats sees beauty from spiritual perspective and according to him, realization of truth leads to the fulfillment of beauty. Readers of Tagore and Keats get eye-opening insights from the viewpoints that are followed by their expressions in regarding the tenets of truth and beauty. Truth and beauty fulfill each other in their harmonious existence in the universe. The authors make us realize that beauty does not emanate merely from sensual pleasure; it is an abstract idea, a spiritual understanding that originates from rhythmic attachment with truth. This article compares and contrasts

philosophies of truth and beauty from the writings of Tagore and Keats. In doing so, the paper investigates the literary works of the two writers and explores how they have philosophized truth and beauty in the domain of human thought as well as in the realm of spiritual discipline.

Key Words: Beauty, truth, philosophy, life, universe, quest

Literature aims to flourish truth and beauty which resonate the elegance of delight and blow the breezes of spiritual well being in human thought. Rabindranath Tagore, Sobriquet Gurudev, a Bengali Polymath and first Non- European Nobel laureate and John Keats, the great English romantic and poet of beauty reshaped their own distinctive region's literature with profoundly sensitive, vigorous and well composed works where truth and beauty are merged as the majestic and all encompassing spirits. Tagore in his romantic expression has poured intense solemnity and comfort with a keen search of beauty in things. He has also sought to explore the greater underlying truth of these beauties in complete spiritual realization. To John Keats, beauty stands as the spirit of life and art. It is the predominating force of his poetry from the early *Endymion* to his last poem *Hyperion: A Vision*. At the very beginning of *Endymion*, he declares: *A thing of Beauty is a joy forever/ its loveliness increases.*

Tagore's romanticism and his glorification of love appear as a continuation of Valmiki tradition, the deep understanding of the beauty and wealth of Mother Earth and Nature. His love of nature and world, love of man and love of God, are the accents of keen awareness of beauty, acute apprehension of truth and earnest interest of the cosmic infinite whole. At the same time John Keats demonstrates his grand eminence as a poet stepping his foot on the ground of beauty. The everlasting essence of a beautiful object, increases its charms with the passing of time.

However, he explores that the sensuous beauty can not be eternal and it is only spiritual beauty- the beauty of ideas, realization of truth which cross the limit of time. Keats and Tagore are very much akin in their conception of beauty and truth. Beauty and Truth- these two intangible ideas are tough to be defined exactly, though there has been on going attempt to bring them in specific formats. The classical conception of beauty implies that it consists of an arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, according to proportion harmony, symmetry and similar notions. This idea is a primordial western idea of beauty which is embodied in classical and neo classical architecture, sculpture, literature and music. Aristotle opines in „Poetics“ that “to be beautiful, a living creature and every whole made up of parts, must ... present a certain order in its arrangement of parts” (Aristotle, Volume 2, 2322) And in the „Metaphysics“ “the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree”. (Aristotle, Volume 2, 1705).

In „ De Veritate Religione“ Augustine asks explicitly whether things are beautiful because they give delight or whether they give delight because they are beautiful; he emphatically opts for the second (Augustine, 247). This conception finds echo in Keats when he states “a thing of beauty is joy forever”.

Tagore always emphasizes in the fact that all the loveliness of the world comes by communion in Ideal Form – the Divine or with the universal soul. Plato’s statements in the „Symposium“ and Plotinus’s in the „Enneads“ connect beauty to a response of love and desire but locate beauty itself in the realm of the Forms and the beauty of particular object in their participation in the Form.

Concerning Beauty Santayana asserts that beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing... Beauty is a value, that is, it is not a perception of a matter of fact or of a relation, it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature. An object cannot be beautiful if it

can give pleasure to nobody: a beauty to which all men were forever indifferent is a contradiction in terms. Beauty is therefore a positive value that is intrinsic, it is a pleasure.

According to Tagore, Beauty and Truth are intimately connected and one completes the other. Tagore himself says in “My Reminiscences” that: “The stream which comes from the infinite and flows towards the finite – that is true, the Good; it is subject to laws, definite in form. It’s echo which returns towards the infinite is Beauty and Joy which are difficult to touch or grasp and so make us beside ourselves”. Beauty also must observe this rhythm as it is the product of joy which is disciplined and restrained and not wild or extravagant.

Regarding Keats we observe that at the starting of his poetic career his love of beauty was entirely sensuous. The common objects of everyday life moved him and aroused a strong aesthetic delight in his mind. His poetic thought was thrilled observing the beauty of nature, beauty of art and literature, beauty of women, beauty of mythology and folklore etc. But great thought was his physical sensibility and his enjoyment of everything though came through the senses, he knew at the very moment of such sensuous enjoyment that it was not everything and not enough, so there is an ever attempt in his poetry to relate the sensuous beauty to something more permanent and real. His concept of Beauty evolved and became spiritual. This truth has clearly come out in his letters. He once wrote in a letter to Fanny Brawne in February, 1820 “I have loved the principle of Beauty in all Things.” And in another “I love the mighty abstract idea of Beauty in all things”. The spiritual beauty according to Keats can be realized through the realization of truth which transcends time and space and is eternal. When beauty and truth obtain oneness then they achieve the permanent value. Keats was intensely concerned about the Beauty of Soul and Beauty of ideas.

Tagore's concept of beauty is revolved centering the beauty of human being, beauty of nature, beauty of the earth and above all the beauty of the whole universe – and in all of the beauties he has sought to explore the presence of the eternal truth – the eternal soul. Tagore's conception of beauty is strongly blended with his philosophy of Truth. In his „Religion of Man“ Tagore writes: “The infinite personality comprehends the Universe. There can not be anything that can not be sub assumed by the human personality and this proves that the Truth of the Universe is human Truth. When our Universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as Truth, we feel it as Beauty.” Tagore has appreciated beauty because it is a manifestation of Truth. We can perceive the presence of God in the midst of Truth. In Gitanjali we get the poet as complete devotee of God who utters in a song:

“THOU art the sky and thou art the nest as well

O thou beautiful, there in the nest, it is thy

Love that encloses the soul with colors and sounds and odours.” (LXVII)

The sense of Truth stands to make us understand the law of the Creation and the sense of beauty makes us realize the harmony in the universe. Beauty acts as a bridge between the self and matter. To worship beauty is a kind of establishing kinship with the other man and elements of nature and this is completely a disinterested matter as it does not consider anything worldly loss or gain. Appreciation of beauty is a kind of self expression – it is the expression of the inner feeling of the soul.

Tagore thinks that in our aesthetic contemplation of beauty, we observe the entire universe in our consciousness- but in many cases it is not totally disinterested matter because this contemplation takes us out of our narrow individuality and provides the spirit of loving all things

outside us. The poet who appreciates the beauty of Death and considers it as his lover in a song in „Bhanu Singha Tagore“s Padabali“ by singing “Oh, Death, you are equal to my lover”– again sings in a poem of „Kari o Komol“ – “I do not want to die in this beautiful world; I want to live among Man”- Here we notice the exotic urge of the poet“s heart to live among men than to attain spiritual salvation. This note is also declared in Plato“s „Symposium“ where he suggests that the lover longs for the good to be his own forever, it follows that we are bound to long for immortality as well as for the good which is to say that love is a longing for immortality. About his concept of Truth and Beauty in his conversation with Einstein in 1940, he says:

“When our Universe is in Harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as Truth, we feel it as Beauty. Truth of the universe is Human Truth. Truth is realized through man. Beauty is in the ideal of perfect harmony which is in the Universal Being; Truth the perfect comprehension of the Universal mind.” Tagore“s esoteric consciousness is very much concerned regarding the harmony between Man and the Universe which he feels as the reflection of Truth and Beauty.

In John Keats“ an often quoted line which provides the poet genuine popularity is “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty”. Here a question arises that if beauty and truth are united, then what makes them different. If beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty, then why two separated words for the same thing? Whatever human being perceive through the eyes that is true. Human beings are truth and the observations of the whole universe with thoughtful mind that is beauty. When we observe the Truth of the Universe, we feel the presence of universal soul and in Indian philosophy there is also the belief “Sattyam Shibam Sudaram” . The mind corresponds the reality and when there is reason in this correspondence it appears as truth. Truth is very much interconnected with beauty. In „Ode on a Grecian Urn“, Keats weighs up the urn as the repository of beauty that lies in the real world of man and this ultimate reality is the Truth, Tagore contemplates death, again he comes to the real world and expresses his desire to live in this beautiful world, similarly we see Keats makes an excursion to

the world of art, again returns to reality and in charmed eyes observe the reality of the world. In „Ode to a Nightingale“, though the poet is amused by the beautiful music of the Nightingale, again at last part of the poem he returns to reality where he says „forlorn!“ which indicates his own loneliness. Beauty for Keats is an inert thing through which he confronts issues. While expressing his views in letters he expresses that a great poet (e.g Shakespeare) looks at human life, sees the terrible truth of its evil, but sees it so intensely that it becomes an element of beauty which is created by his act of perception. Keats statement is an accurate description of the response to evil or ugliness which tragedy makes. The matter of tragedy is ugly but here the painful truth is seen, which is very much co - related to human life, that can be seen as beauty. To observe life in this way as Keats believes is to see life truly. Beauty is thus something which connects and reconciles two kinds of truth – through the meditation of beauty truth of fact becomes truth of affirmation and truth of life. Like Tagore, Keats is very much interested to discover the truth that is existed between the contradiction of love and death, between the sense of personal identity and the certainty of pain and extinction.

Tagore associates spiritual discipline and tranquility of mind with the realization of beauty. He thinks that it is beauty that makes a tie between man and the universe. The universe itself is truth and the existence of human being, plants, animals and all the elements of the universe are truth. Truth must be related to universal human mind. In any case, if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then it is absolutely non existing. Truth is everywhere therefore everything is the object of our knowledge. Beauty is omnipresent, therefore, everything is capable of giving us joy. The exploration of Beauty and Truth is at the center of the poetic meditation of the both poets. We hear Tagore asserting in „Chinnapatraboli, 25“

“Beauty for me is the real passion. It makes me really unrest, beauty at the peak of senses is beyond power. Keep away the eyes and ears, entering with all heart, the boundary of its restlessness/ variation will not be found”

Tagore’s concept of beauty centered through all embracing humanism that appears as religion with him and it is more universal than individual. Keats’ idea is also motivated like that when he proclaims many times that the poet speaks to men, not to himself or to other artists. The aim of poetry he denotes in the “Sleep and Poetry (1816)” that “ to soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of man” as well as in “ The Fall of Hyperion” the poet delivers the message that:

Sure a poet is a sage

A humanist, physician to all men (189-90)

Tagore and Keats glorified Truth and Beauty, keeping the fact of humanism at the centre.

Tagore’s understanding and appreciation of female beauty appears in different ways in different stages of his life. While as an adolescent, he observes woman as a fairy queen of his dream world: as a young man, he notices woman as a romantic princess. Woman deserves to be loved not because she is beautiful, gracious or good but because of her existence and that is the truth. However, this extent of love for women is moderately relevant in the rejuvenation of beauty in Keats. Feminine charm enchants Keats and we also find a strong infatuation of the poet for his beloved.

His love for Fanny Browne acted as a life force to him which was also greatly important in forming his perception about beauty and truth. To Keats, the beauty of Fanny appears as truth. On 8th July 1819 a letter written to Fanny explores, “Why may I not speak of your Beauty. Since

without that I could never have loved you? I can not conceive and beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty” (Gardner 175).

In Keats imagination Fanny stands as the real emblem of beauty. As there is no alternative of true beauty, Fanny – the epitome of beauty represents truth. She acts as a driving force to Keats to find out beauty and she also shows him the path to explore the reality. Keats’ philosophy of writing provides the idea that beauty and truth represent the same idea observed from the two different aspects. Through experiences people get the knowledge of the reality and that is the „truth“ and that is beauty. Keats, all through his short span of life kept love, truth and beauty at the highest values. Fanny, Keats thinks ravished him with the values of her beauty and love when he says: “My Creed is love and you are it’s only tenet. You have ravished me away by a power I can not resist” (Gardner 197). Again he also undergoes mental agony and suffering for the cause of Fanny but still he loves her.

In „Chitra“ Tagore in his outstanding Hymn to the paramount of beauty „Urvashi“ has made a noteworthy delineation of the court dancer of paradise Urvashi. The Myth Maiden incarnate Eros is “neither mother, daughter nor wife. Urvashi, as made the Court dancer of Paradise by Indra – the King of Paradise, is much more fascinating and picturesque figure than Ahalya (Character of Mahabharata). Though Indian religion, legend and literature adored Urvashi, she is not so great as she is in Tagore’s magnificent poem about her. She appears as a lady of Manifold magnificence whose path is strewn with light and music. It is the same lady who is found in the individual human soul, shedding all her variety. Urvashi as a truly Tagorian

romantic image blooms as a lonely lotus of love:

O world- bewitching Urvashi!

Your slender limbs are bathed in tears of the

world Your feet are red with blood of its“ heart

Loose haired and naked, on the centre

Of the blossomed lotus of the worlds; desire (Sanchayita, 47-51)

Urvashi appears as that aspect of beauty which is observed in the flowering frenzy of nature and which in the shape of woman haunts, startles and way lays man. Again the lady of Manifold magnificence is encircled in the multitude of forms in which she displays herself, she has no life of her own. In different ages and lands women have been considered as the great source of inward inspiration. As Tagore points it “There is a woman within our inner nature. We bring to her all that we have gathered ...” (Prarthana/ Prayerin, Shantiniketan; Rabindra Rachanabali ; 13, p 475) and the poet seeks “ to explore existence in terms of this furnished interior being- to engage through its means with life, with the relation of life to death, within the space and time which transcends space and time. (Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed) : The Oxford Tagore Translations, selected Poems: Rabindranath Tagore). Tagore depicts Urvashi as totally different from Leda, Helen, St. Anne and Monalisa, she is the embodiment of pure poetry, disassociated from all the conventional forms. She manifests herself in the expansive universe of space and it

leads Tagore to imagine that she is the creative spirit of life which makes the earth shower with flowers and fruits and causes the frenzy of desire in man's hearts.

Keats, from the time of the earliest „Sleep and Poetry“ to the second Hyperion is always found to vacillate between the senses and the mind. By the time of Hyperion: A Vision, the poet is much confident in asserting that the highest poetry draws its strength from human suffering. During the illness of his brother Tom, Keats came in close contact with physical suffering and a new „human – heartedness“ entered his poetry. Similarly in Tagore, we notice that death and suffering have brought a philosophical dimension in his lyrics. He had to suffer bereavements one after another in quick succession, but he was not dismayed for he felt that death was swallowed up in the victory of life over death. After the death of Jyotindranath's wife Kadambari Devi he realized that his sorrow only enabled him to view the beauty of life and nature in a more correct perspective. The attachment to the world got relayed while Death gave him a sense of freedom making him understand the deeper meaning of the beauty of the world. He accepts it with greater positive value which according to him the fulfillment and completion of life. Through death nothing is lost, it is the gateway through which life ceaselessly flows and renews itself. The idea of death and suffering provides a mysterious spiritual pleasure. In Tagore we always hear the urge of the heart to get united with the infinite. It is the tender desire of the heart, it is the spiritual sweetness, the melodies of which can be felt only through the heart. We find the poet singing in Gitanjali:

„Into the audience hall by the fathomless

Where swells up the music of toneless strings
I shall take this harp of my life
I shall tune it to the notes forever and when
It has sobbed out its last utterance,
Lay down my silent harp at the feet of the silent“.

Keats“ love of beauty was not confined in that of sensuous glorification. The deep meditation of life and suffering bring him very close to spiritual realm. In „Ode on a Grecian Urn“ the poet is keenly aware to extract the spiritual pleasure. In „Ode on a Melancholy“ where he sings;

„She dwells with Beauty- Beauty that must die“

With this great realization, he has sought to explore the spiritual beauty when he utters in „Ode on a Grecian Urn“:

“Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes play on:

Not to the sensual ear, but more endured.”

Here the fact is apparent that gradually the world of sense perception loses its meaning to the poet. He looks beyond it and through it, raise his eyesight to find out something more. He captures this truth not by reason but by intuition, inspiration and experiences. In Keats the fact

comes repeatedly in his letters that „Nothing ever becomes real, till it is experienced“. (Letter written to George and Georgian Keats in Feb.1819)

In „Ode to a Nightingale“ the poet wants to create a world of pure joy but in the poem „Ode on a Grecian Urn“ we notice a world that represents the life of the people on the urn. Keats observes simultaneously the curved figures on the marble vase as well as the live people in ancient Greece. They can not move or change as they are existing in a frozen or suspended time. There is also no change in their feelings, yet the unknown sculptor has succeeded in creating a sense of living passion and turbulent action. When we feel the life of the people on the urn, the sculptor and his works these things appear as truth and when we observe the curved picture on the urn and appreciate its excellence, these appear as beauty.

Life goes on keeping harmony in every sphere, the law of principle which governs its rhythms, is the principle of love and joy. In Tagore's point of view the finite and the infinite meet with an embrace of love and joy. The individual unites with other man or things external to himself which is the union of love. Human being can explore the truth regarding himself only through the inter-relatedness with his fellow man and the external universe that provides him the opportunity to come out from the narrow selfishness. Art does not fix its aim to be the expression of beauty but as the expression of the unity of life which is the highest truth. Truth and Beauty are closely connected providing perfection to one another.

Beauty needs to observe this rhythm and unity of life. Beauty generates joy when it passes through suffering and purification. In Keats „Ode to a Nightingale“, there echoes the characterization of “the wariness, the fever and the fret” that are brought on by human awareness

of their own passing. In „ode on a Grecian Urn“, we notice the „urn“'s characters as frozen in time. The lovers will always love though they will never consummate their desire, the musicians will always play beneath trees that will never lose their leaves.

We find the poet appreciates this state of existence but the tone does not remain the same all through the poem, we notice his heart deepened with grief and realistic detail. The urn, while beautiful and seemingly eternal is not life, the lovers while forever young and happy in the chase, can never engage in making love in real life and the tunes while beautiful in the abstract do not play to the „sensual ear“ – it is the tension between time and timelessness, silence and sound, the static and the eternal.

Keats has always sought to find joy through the object of beauty- which is capable of providing immense pleasure. Tagore is also conscious regarding the fact. He says “ Things in which we do not take joy are either a burden upon our minds to be got rid of at any cost; or they are useful, and therefore in temporary and partial relation to us useful and becoming burdensome when their utility is lost; or they are like wandering vagabonds, loitering for a moment on the outskirts of our own when it is a nothing of joy to us, the recognition and then passing on”.

Tagore observes beauty as a spiritual experience, not as „mischievous illusion“. The idea of beauty though un-analyzable, but yet conceivable and embeddable in perceptible forms. He also thinks that beauty is born in man“'s pure mind to fraternize with the outer world of life and nature. Therefore, it is at the root of the rhythmic movement of the universe. The sense of truth enables to realize the law in creation and the sense of beauty make us feel harmony in the universe.

Tagore observes everything in the universe expressing itself in the infinity. The stars are silent and peaceful and so is the vast sky which is their home. All things meet together in the horizon – the blue sky sometimes stands for or suggests the fact of infinity, majesty and tenderness of God and death is the gate that demonstrates the travel from known to the unknown. Tagore's two most famous poems of the Shelidah period Sonar Taree (The Golden Boat) and Jete Nahi Dibo (I will not let you go), published in „Sonar Tare“ in 1894 reflect his strong realization about the fact of human life and deeds.

The world accepts all the fruits of our labour but we can't secure our place forever. In the passage of time we sink into oblivion. The ever urge of human heart is to preserve the impresses on the work. But where is the room? The harvest of our lives stays on in some form or other but human being can not stand here, forever. The poet sings: On the bare river-bank I am alone
The golden boat has taken everything, all I had
is Gone

Again Tagore thinks that life is perpetual wayfaring, he observes the life as an endless journey or Chirajatra . In the poem, „Jete Nahi dibo“ (I will not let you go), Tagore has pointed out the innate truth of human nature which is perceived in the poem by a little child. The poet visualizes the replica of the Mother earth in his small daughter who tries to hold her children back to her bosom forever but she is bound to let them go. We hear in this poem the ever cry of human heart,

And so in the sighing trees today I hear

An anxious longing, even as an idle play

The indifferent noon breeze tosses the dead leaves

The day wears on: the shadow longer falls

Benath the peepal tree to a country tune

The Infinite's flute wails on Creation's plain:

Kshudiram Das, a distinguished Tagore Scholar states that Rabindranath's literary genius consists, fundamentally, in his assimilation of visible real life (Jibon) with the idealized or imagined unseen (arup) that transcends the sensate world. This synthesis is a reflection of the poet successful amalgam of the sensuous western literary tradition and the introspective meditative tradition of his native culture. While Das perhaps comes closer to truth, he tends to overlook the human experiences that inspired some of the poet's outstanding creations in a major way.

Rabindranath Tagore and John Keats have written vividly about various aspects of human nature in their writings. Beauty and Truth as inevitable aspects of human feeling have not escaped the attention of Tagore and Keats. Beauty is associated with pleasure and enjoyment. Truth, on the other hand, is generally interpreted as harsh, unavoidable that provide hard experience. This fact also comes out in the voice of Tagore in the poem "Rup Narayaner Kule" where he says: "Truth is extremely hard

I'm in love with that hardness"

Tagore and Keats intermingle truth and beauty. They think that realization of truth builds the way to perceive the true nature of beauty. These descriptions are transformed through the ways we experience our lives and view the whole universe.

Philosophies of truth and beauty from Tagore and Keats distinguish them from many other poets and build their own notions of these two ideas . In the creative harmony of beauty

and truth, the literary creation of two poets get nourishment. Beauty emerges as an idea that originates from truth which needs and deserves to be loved, to be adored and to be worshipped and in the form of beauty we can find out the reflection of truth.

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